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SUBJECT: UAE ENVIRONMENTAL PROGRESS AND CHALLENGES

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¶1. Summary: the UAE, the second largest economy in the Arab World, is in the midst of aggressive economic development. Dubai is building high profile luxury projects such as the "Palms" and the world's tallest skyscraper, the Burj Dubai. On November 19, 2007, Amman ESTH Hub Officer visited Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Sharjah to gauge the environmental progress and challenges facing the UAE. The UAE is investing in developing an improved environmental framework and clean technologies. A recent directive for all buildings started in 2008 to be "green" will help constrain adverse environmental effects from the many construction projects. However, public awareness of environmental issues will remain a challenge amid rampant consumerism and subsidized power and water. End summary.

Environmental Regulation in UAE

¶2. UAE's environment laws are defined through the 1999 federal law 24 and 5 subsequent executive orders covering environmental impact assessments, marine environment, air quality, handling of hazardous wastes, and usage of pesticide/fertilizers. Each of the seven emirates has its own bylaws and regulations which can often be more stringent than the federal law. A Ministry of Environment and Water was established in 2006 with responsibility for legislation, strategy, policies and representing UAE at international meetings (UAE is a member of most global environmental conventions). The Federal Environmental Agency (FEA) is the executive arm of the Ministry.

¶3. Dr. Saad Al Numairi, Environment Advisor at the FEA described the FEA, linkages to the 7 emirates through the environmental coordination committee. Al Numairi noted that all 7 emirates need to bless any new regulations (however, as the two largest emirates, Abu Dhabi and Dubai often are influential in setting a direction). Majid Al Mansouri, Secretary General of the Abu Dhabi Environment Agency (ADEA), seconded this observation, noting that his agency's \$11 million budget at its 1996 founding had grown to over \$500 million -- allowing him to build the requisite infrastructure for licensing, monitoring and enforcing Abu Dhabi's environmental laws -- without monitoring from the FEA.

Signs of Environmental Progress

¶4. The FEA is pleased with UAE's progress on environmental issues. Al Numairi cited Yale University's environmental performance index where UAE ranked 141 in 2003, 110 in 2005 and 47 in 2007.

¶5. Al Mansouri was similarly upbeat on Abu Dhabi's progress noting its biodiversity: there are several protected areas with UNESCO recently certifying one biosphere. About 4,000 Arabian oryx and 50,000 gazelles are maintained in the emirate of Abu Dhabi. ADEA has also established a falcon hospital to treat sick falcons from around the world to support the UAE's cultural heritage. (ADEA is also helping wildlife conservation in other countries - rehabilitating Mongolian and African threatened species and reintroducing them in those regions.) ADEA recently signed a 20-year agreement with San Diego zoo to help the Agency manage the Al-Ain Zoo as it is converted to a theme park.

¶6. A recent directive from the Prime Minister of the UAE requires developers to comply with "green" building standards for all new building construction starting in 2008. The directive targets achieving 30 percent energy savings for cooling; nine percent savings for lighting; and six percent for water, while also achieving 30 percent water conservation.

¶7. MASDAR (Abu Dhabi Future Energy Company) is focused on sustainable energy with many solar energy projects in the pipeline including the development of the first solar city with zero carbon emissions within a few years. MASDAR is organizing the January 21-23 World Future Energy Summit in Abu Dhabi. (A Japanese delegation recently visited the FEA and proposed the first self-sustainable and carbon-neutral "cool city" in the UAE.)

Environmental Challenges

¶8. Key environmental challenges facing the UAE include:

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-- Protecting the marine environment: thousands of oil tankers pass through Straits of Hormuz and many older ships discharge ballast water and oil; many land reclamation projects underway including the famous Dubai "Palms" and "World" project can affect marine life;
-- Public education challenges regarding energy use and general environmental awareness;
-- Water resource management: Water prices are subsidized. Currently 40% of total water used in Abu Dhabi is from desalination with a cost above \$1/cubic meter (ADEA is starting a thermal desalination pilot plant with German help and also planning to establish a Water Resources Academy in Abu Dhabi to provide regional support). Mansouri noted that changing the behavior of people who take cheap water for granted is challenging. ADEA plans to focus more on demand management with penalties for excessive water use, while also reviewing the tariff structure;
-- Air pollution caused by cars, asphalt, rampant construction in Dubai, oil tankers);
-- Municipal waste: Dubai's consumption focused society has the largest ecological footprint per capita, 2-3 kilos of raw materials/day (according to Ibrahim Al Zubi from the Knowledge and Human Resource Authority (KHRA) of Dubai).

The Public Education Challenge

¶9. Ibrahim Al Zubi is the head of the Environmental Education Project at the Dubai KHRA (de facto Ministry of Education). Al Zubi also leads an NGO, the Emirates Diving Association (EDA) and believes his organization serves as an early warning system for marine life degradation. Al Zubi led the EDA in Dubai's participation in the 14th October Arab Environment Day. Six Gulf countries participated in the recent "Clean up Arabia" campaign helping clean beaches and remove litter.

¶10. KHRA works on policies, strategies and education for K-12 and higher education. KHRA recently undertook an environmental awareness survey of public schools in Dubai, covering roughly 80% of

the students. The results compiled in July 2007 were shocking - the low awareness, no environmental clubs in the schools, and little faith in NGOs. (Interestingly, the survey found that some ethnic groups such as the Indian community were recycling, largely due to poverty.)

¶11. A K-12 task force on environmental education has now been formed with participation from many government authorities to focus on school outreach. KHRA hopes the outreach will be a pilot project for all the UAE and the Arab region. For higher education, KHRA is enlisting faculty participation as well as innovative activities such as solar powered boats or solar house contests. ESTH Officer discussed the possibility of having Green Youth Ambassadors clubs in the UAE and Middle East. As part of his youth outreach, Al Zubi is exploring the possibility of a Dubai visit by Al Gore and engaging with Warner Brothers to have Leonardo DeCaprio come for the February 4th Middle East premiere of the documentary "11th Hour".

Emirates Green Building Council

¶12. ESTH Officer met with Dr. Sadek Al Owainat, Chairman of the Emirates Green Building Council (EGBC). Patterned after the US Green Building Council, the EGBC was formed in September 2006 with 40 participating members (large developers and contractors). It is the 8th Green Building Council (GBC) in the world (and the first in the Middle East). They have customized the US Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) guidelines for local use (such as increasing the number of water related criteria). The EGBC believes most developers in Dubai are keen to adopt the LEED principles and will not be overtly affected by the recent UAE government directive that all new construction from 2008 has to be green. A Dubai building was recently awarded the highest platinum LEED rating. The EGBC believes they can support the development of GBC's in other NEA countries and could share their customized LEED guidelines. The lead developer of the high-profile "Palms" project is a member of the EGBC and will be taking mitigation steps to be more LEED compliant. Al Owainat noted that the world's tallest building under construction -- the Burj Dubai -- is not expected to be LEED compliant.

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Nuclear energy: in the future or not?

¶13. While interlocutors claimed no knowledge of concrete plans to establish a nuclear energy infrastructure, press articles referred to a joint Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) venture for a feasibility study regarding a joint nuclear energy plant. Some interlocutors noted the low probability of GCC-shared infrastructure in such a critical area ever coming to fruition.
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